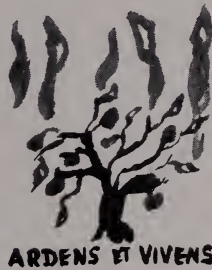


Studies in
REFORMED THEOLOGY
AND
HISTORY



Volume 1 Number 2
Spring 1993

PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Studies in
REFORMED THEOLOGY AND HISTORY



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FOR US AND OUR SALVATION:
Incarnation and Atonement in the Reformed Tradition

FOR US AND OUR SALVATION:
Incarnation and Atonement
in the Reformed Tradition

BRUCE L. McCORMACK



PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

STUDIES IN REFORMED THEOLOGY AND HISTORY is published four times annually by Princeton Theological Seminary. All correspondence should be addressed to David Willis-Watkins, Editor, STUDIES IN REFORMED THEOLOGY AND HISTORY, CN 821, Princeton, NJ 08542 0803, USA. Fax (609) 497-7728.

MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSIONS

Contributions to STUDIES IN REFORMED THEOLOGY AND HISTORY are invited. Copies of printed and electronic manuscript requirements are available upon request from the Editor at the above address.

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISSN: 1067-4268

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Contents

EDITOR'S FOREWORD	vii
PREFACE	xi
I INTRODUCTION	1
II THE DOCTRINE OF THE INCARNATION	3
Background for Reformed Christology: The Debates with Lutheranism	3
John Calvin (1509–1564)	6
Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575)	9
Zacharius Ursinus (1534–1583)	11
The <i>Communicatio Idiomatum</i> in the Period of Reformed Orthodoxy	13
Summary	16
III THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT	17
The Assumption of Human “Flesh”—Fallen or UnFallen?	17
The Acquired Righteousness of Christ	22
The Death of Death in the Death of Christ	25
CONCLUSION	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	37



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Editor's Foreword

Dr. Bruce L. McCormack is the Weyerhaeuser Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He was previously Lecturer in Reformed Theology, New College, Edinburgh, where he was also the Director of the H. R. Mackintosh Dogmatics Library. He is a member of the Church of Scotland and served on its Panel on Doctrine. His publications include "Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament," in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. M. Burrows and P. Rorem (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991). Forthcoming from Oxford University Press is his *Wanderer Between Two Worlds: The Genesis and Development of Karl Barth's Dialectical Theology, 1909–1936*.

The histories of interconfessional dialogues and the theological literature they entail constitute a major stream of Reformed theology and history. Since its inception, the reforming movement, which came to be known as the Reformed churches, has been characterized by dialogues with those of other persuasions. The more central the doctrines and practices being debated, the more urgent the dialogues. It was of utmost importance to identify as clearly as possible the matters on which the disputants were in accord and the matters on which there was serious disagreement. When church and state were closely intertwined, the outcome of such colloquia often determined what territories were open to which believers, where people could expect encouragement or persecution, what migrations would follow if persons held to beliefs no longer tolerated in a region. Even more seriously—or so, almost to a person, the leaders of these dialogues claimed—what hung in the balance was whether this or that movement, this or that tradition, was schismatic.

In the modern context, the territorial stakes may no longer obtain—or they may just take subtler forms. However, the urgency of the issue of perpetuating false divisions continues. Interconfessional conversations involve re-hearing another's teachings, they involve a rereading and reinterpretation of one's own

tradition, and they inevitably involve critical judgments about where and on what matters the respective traditions need correction. The present study by Bruce McCormack belongs to such a setting. It contributes to the dialogues with other traditions over central matters, in this case Eastern Orthodoxy and incarnation and atonement. He attends to Calvin's doctrine, but is especially interested in the developments after Calvin when Reformed theologians reappropriated the anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology of the post-Chalcedonian period. The result was—so McCormack argues—"that a tremendous theological compatibility exists between the mature and positive Reformed Christology of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the orthodox Christology of the seventh century. . . . Such a shared understanding in the area of Christology does not automatically yield agreement on the doctrine of the atonement; but it may indeed lay a promising foundation for further discussions in that area as well."

The late Msg. Charles Moeller, then of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, frequently spoke about the importance of "triangulation" for the future of ecumenical relations. By that, he and others meant that dialogue was necessary for two reasons. The East-West dialogue was necessary to overcome the misleading stereotypes both sides have developed over centuries of relatively firm theological isolation, and the East-West dialogue was necessary to the next stages of dialogue among churches of the West. That prediction for the future of the ecumenical movement, and for the research which informs it, has been amply validated. Discussions among churches in the West, whether among Protestants or between Protestants and Roman Catholics, sooner or later have involved a rediscovery of Patristic sources which they commonly valued and to whose correct reading they share a commitment. Of course, such triangulation also means that Eastern Orthodoxy must engage in a thorough reexamination of its views of churches of the West and a thorough reappraisal of its reading of Patristics. It is still often immensely difficult for many Eastern Orthodox churches to see the value of serious theological conversations with representatives of the West. There are numerous cultural as well as theological reasons for this difficulty. Far more impressive, at any rate, than the difficulty of dialogue between the churches of the East and West are the rewards of such an enterprise, rewards in the form of more accurate understandings of the interplay of cultural and theological influences in the several traditions.

The 1992 *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, edited by Donald McKim (Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY) is a useful volume for reminding oneself of some of the biographical details of the figures and topics treated in

this study. The encyclopedia's articles on Ursinus, on Wollebius, and on the various Reformed confessions referred to here—as well as those on Calvin and Bullinger—are helpful and have bibliographical suggestions in each case.

David Willis-Watkins

Preface

“For Us and Our Salvation: Incarnation and Atonement in the Reformed Tradition” is a paper that I gave at the third session of the official dialogue between the Orthodox Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which met at Kappel am Albis, Switzerland from 9–15 March 1992. The ambitious title was given to me and was not of my own devising. A thorough treatment of the problems of incarnation and atonement in the Reformed tradition would have placed upon me the responsibility of giving attention to a number of figures who do not put in an appearance here. The criterion for selection that I employed was, understandably, an ecumenical one. I chose to treat those figures which in my view provided the best possible basis for furthering dialogue with Eastern Orthodox theologians. In spite of the obvious limitations of the dialogue format, I am quite happy to have this paper appear within the fine new series *Studies in Reformed Theology and History*.

I believe it is important that the contents of ecumenical conversations be made available to the public. For this reason, I have chosen to make no revisions but to allow the paper to go forward in the form in which it was first presented, except for minor editorial changes. More importantly, however, I also believe that the paper provides a clear account of one way of reading the Reformed tradition on the central themes of incarnation and atonement that is well worth considering as a theological option in the present situation. I am therefore setting it before a wider audience in the hope that it may make some contribution to helping create a greater sense of theological identity among Reformed Christians today.

Bruce L. McCormack

I

Introduction

Who for us men [and women] and our salvation, came down from heaven, and was made flesh from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate.

Christological controversy lay at the heart of the solidification of the Reformed movement into an independent branch of the Protestant reformation in the sixteenth century. The conflict that developed between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli in the 1520s over the nature and significance of the eucharist very quickly resolved itself into a fundamental disagreement over Christology. In the initial stages of the debate, Reformed theologians tended to content themselves with exposing what they saw as docetic tendencies in the Lutheran Christology. This had the effect of giving their own reflections on Christology a largely negative, polemical cast. Calvin's presentation of Christology, for example, even in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes*, is controlled to a great extent by his concern to refute the errors of certain "opponents." He was dealing with the Lutherans generally but also with the teachings of Andreas Osiander, Menno Simons, and Michael Servetus.

By the 1560s, however, a more positive treatment of Christology began to emerge which, through its reappropriation of the ancient anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology of the post-Chalcedonian period, brought Reformed Christology in proximity to the interpretation of the Chalcedonian formula which had been declared to be orthodox by the Sixth Ecumenical Council. The thesis of this paper is that a tremendous theological compatibility exists between the mature and positive Reformed Christology of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the orthodox Christology of the seventh century. As we shall see, such a shared understanding in the area of Christology does not automatically yield agreement on the doctrine of the

atonement; but it may indeed lay a promising foundation for further discussions in that area as well.

Before beginning, it would be well to say a word here about the method and limitations of this study. It would have been most desirable to have presented a strictly confessional study of Reformed Christology. Such a procedure would have carried greater authority in establishing what it means to be "Reformed" in Christology and soteriology. Unfortunately, the great majority of the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are silent on precisely the questions that anyone engaged in a dialogue with the Orthodox churches would like to raise. Therefore, it has proved necessary to go behind the confessions to the dogmatic works of the writers of the major confessions, above all to the works of John Calvin, Heinrich Bullinger, and Zacharius Ursinus. There it is possible to find a fuller presentation of views on incarnation and atonement. What follows is intended therefore not so much as a piece of confessional theology as it is a piece of dogmatic theology.

The presentation seeks to be *schulgemäß*, not in the sense of a repristination of centuries old forms of thought, but in the sense of a disciplined, ordered, and comprehensive reflection on the range of problems raised by sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed reflection on our theme. Unfortunately, this goal cannot be fully achieved within the space and time of a dialogue format. I am very conscious of a number of voices that ought to have been allowed to come to expression here but cannot under the circumstances. Still, that reader will understand me well who reads this as a piece of "school theology": a theology which is guided by and inspired by the Reformed theologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but which believes it possible critically to correct that tradition without breaking with it.

II

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

BACKGROUND FOR REFORMED CHRISTOLOGY: THE DEBATE WITH LUTHERANISM

Reformed Christology did not emerge in a vacuum. It was the product of a lengthy, sustained debate with Lutheranism over the proper understanding of the hypostatic union and the *communicatio idiomatum* to which it gave rise. Therefore, Reformed Christology will not be understood in all of its depths and dimensions unless some attention is given first to the theological context in which it was born.

The spark that gave rise to the highly polemical debate between Luther and Zwingli was the publication of the latter's *De vera et falsa religione* in 1525. In this work, the Swiss reformer set forth, for the first time, the doctrine of the Lord's Supper which is customarily associated with his name.¹ Zwingli's memorialism was extremely offensive to Luther and a pamphlet war between the two broke out between 1526 and 1527. As the debate progressed, it focused increasingly on Christology. One of the major arguments advanced by Zwingli in support of his rejection of every notion of a real presence of the body and blood of Christ in or with the eucharistic elements was that after

¹ Zwingli's doctrine of the Lord's Supper has been aptly described by one writer as "symbolic memorialism" to distinguish it from the two other major interpretations advanced by Reformed theologians in the sixteenth century: the "symbolic parallelism" of Heinrich Bullinger and the "symbolic instrumentalism" of Jean Calvin. See Brian Gerrish, "The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions" *Theology Today* 23 (1966): 224-43. It must be noted that Zwingli's sacramentology in itself is of no interest to us here. What is of interest is the Christological argument that he offered in support of it. His insistence that the risen Christ was physically and locally present after the ascension only in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, was an idea that continued to inform Calvin's and Bullinger's reflection on Christology, in spite of their disagreements with his sacramentology.

the ascension, the body of Christ is "located" at the "right hand of the Father." If the resurrection was truly a resurrection of the body, Zwingli reasoned, then a sufficient continuity must exist between the earthly body and the resurrected body such that what is true of the former must also be true of the latter. This meant that since earthly bodies are circumscribed locally, and so can be present in only one place at a time, the same must be true of the risen body. Therefore, if Christ has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God, He cannot still be present here on earth, under the elements of bread and wine.

Luther's response was his doctrine of the ubiquity of the risen body of Christ. For the sake of brevity, I will not recount the historical development of this doctrine, but will simply set it forth in the form in which it became accepted Lutheran teaching in the *Formula of Concord*.

The idea of the ubiquity of the risen body of Christ rested upon a rather novel interpretation of the ancient doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*. According to this interpretation, the effect of the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Christ was to establish a communion between the natures.² The fruit of this communion of natures is an exchange of attributes. This means, especially, a sharing by the human nature in the attributes of the divine nature, including the divine attribute of omnipresence.³ Thereby, the problem of how the risen body of Christ could be physically present in the Eucharist while at the same time being physically present in heaven was resolved. The divine nature of the Logos fills heaven and earth, the human nature participates in the attributes of the divine nature as a result of the hypostatic union, and, therefore, the human nature (including the body of Christ) is present wherever the divine nature of the Logos is present.

To be accurate, it must be added that the Lutherans were sensitive to the charge of Eutychianism which their Christology immediately drew forth from Reformed theologians. The *Formula of Concord* went to great lengths to try to show why Lutheran Christology was not Eutychian. "We believe, teach, and confess that the divine and the human natures are not fused into one essence and that the one is not changed into the other, but that each retains its essential properties and that they never become the properties of the other nature."⁴ The delimitation intended by this affirmation was that essential properties of one nature never become essential to the other nature. Rather, the human nature, while not ceasing to possess its natural, essential proper-

² *Solid Declaration*, VIII, 14, 17.

³ *Epitome*, VIII, 7, 10, 11; *Solid Declaration*, VIII, 9, 12, 27.

⁴ *Epitome*, VIII, 6.

ties, has added to it the properties of the divine nature as a gift, through sharing or participation.⁵ The ancient analogy of an iron in a fire was adduced by way of explaining this participation.⁶

In spite of these careful delimitations, the net effect of the Lutheran teaching was the affirmation that after the resurrection, the human nature of Christ was established in the "full use, revelation and manifestation of his divine majesty." Thus, it could be said, ". . . now not only as God, but also as man, He knows all things, can do all things, is present to all creatures, and has all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth beneath His feet and in His hands . . ."⁷

It should be noted that the restriction of the sharing by the human nature in the attributes of the divine majesty to the time after the resurrection was itself a recognition that logically, such a participation (and the exchange of attributes it entailed) should have been true of Jesus Christ during the days of His earthly ministry as well, since it is the hypostatic union that provided the ground and explanation for it. The Lutherans resolved this difficulty by appealing to a distinction between the "state of humiliation" (in which the human nature voluntarily dispensed with the use of the attributes of divine majesty) and the "state of exaltation" (in which such use was established). The "state of humiliation" was seen to encompass the life of the Incarnate One from conception to resurrection; the "state of exaltation" then followed with the resurrection.

The Reformed response to the issues posed by Lutheran Christology did not begin to emerge in its mature form until the 1560s. When it did, the focus of attention was on the problem of the *communicatio idiomatum*. Reformed theologians too, wanted to affirm an exchange of attributes; but their understanding of it constituted the rejection of the idea of a direct *communio naturarum*. They opted rather for an indirect communion: a communion not of the natures between themselves but a communion of the natures through the Person of the union. The attributes of each nature are indeed properly attributed to the Person of the union, but not to each other. To put it this way (I would argue) brought the Reformed position closely into line with the careful distinctions made between hypostases and natures which had been laid down in the seventh century. As I say, such a view did not emerge all at once. In the next four sections, I will try to sketch briefly the development of Reformed Christology.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ *Solid Declaration*, VIII, 19.

⁷ *Epitome*, VIII, 16.

JEAN CALVIN (1509–1564)

Jean Calvin never set forth a comprehensive account of Christology in the classical sense of a careful investigation into the ontological constitution of the Mediator. There are two basic reasons for this. One was the oft-noted, anti-speculative tendency that governed all of Calvin's theology. In part at least, this tendency was a function of his commitment to Scripture alone as having ultimate and divine authority. The authority of councils was for him, at best, the relatively binding authority proper to a more or less adequate human exposition of the scriptural witness.⁸ In practice, this meant that Calvin was passionately concerned not to speak on any subject beyond the bounds set by the express warrants provided by Scripture. Questions of ontology (whether in relation to trinitarian or christological dogma) were taken up by him only in the broadest terms. The second major reason for Calvin's relative lack of interest in questions of ontology was his overwhelming preoccupation with the *beneficia Christi*. Calvin's theology was shaped by his piety to a greater extent than is often recognized. As E. David Willis has so aptly put it, "The theme which dominates Calvin's Christology is that Christ is to be known fruitfully not in his essence but in his power to save, not as he is invisibly in himself, but as the Father willed him to be towards us in his office."⁹ It was the *office* of the Mediator that dominated Calvin's attention—the mediatorial *activity* of Christ that had brought salvation to the human race—and not the (to his mind) more abstract question of the being of the Mediator.

This does not mean that Calvin had nothing to say on the subject of Christ's person. He did. It is only to suggest that his position on questions which arose in the period after Chalcedon can only be deduced (and at times, only guessed at) on the basis of certain hints and suggestions that he provided in an occasional fashion in his *Institutes*, as well as his commentaries. In general, it can be said that Calvin was deeply committed to the Christology of Chalcedon as a "pure and genuine exposition of Scripture."¹⁰ Beyond that, however, he was often silent at the very points where one would most like to have further information.

Calvin treated the incarnation (and hypostatic union) in Book II, chapters xii through xiv of his *Institutes*. Much of the material that appears here in the

⁸ *Institutes*, IV.ix.

⁹ E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin's Theology* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), p. 61.

¹⁰ *Institutes*, IV.ix.8. In this section of the *Institutes*, Calvin says that he embraces and reverences as holy the "early councils" and mentions specifically those of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, and Chalcedon. To my knowledge, he nowhere makes mention of the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils.

1559 edition was first set forth in the 1536 and 1539 editions; only the polemics against Osiander, Simons, and Servetus are really new. This tells us that Calvin's views on the subject did not significantly change over the course of his life. His basic position was already in place by 1539.

The centerpiece of Calvin's reflections on the incarnation is his interpretation of the humiliation of the eternal Son of God (Phil. 2). For Calvin, the kenosis (or self-emptying) of the Son of God in the incarnation consisted in the *addition* of a human nature. The Son of God did not surrender anything proper to Himself as God,¹¹ but rather "allowed His divinity to be hidden by a 'veil of flesh.'"¹² He took on the form of a servant, thereby surrendering His "glory" (defined as a direct manifestation of His deity to the world).¹³ Karl Barth's interpretation of the kenosis in terms of a laying aside of "recognizability" and an entrance into a kind of "incognito"¹⁴ is wholly apt for describing Calvin's view. God "manifest in the flesh"¹⁵; that is the heartbeat of Calvin's thought.

There have been those who wanted to see in Calvin's Christology the influence of Antiochene forms of thought, especially in phrases like, ". . . He chose for Himself the virgin's womb as a temple in which to dwell."¹⁶ Johannes Witte went so far as to suggest that such a mode of expression was "characteristic" of Calvin and spoke of "a certain spiritual kinship with the Antiochene Christology . . ."¹⁷ To be sure, such language is Antiochene in origin, but its use is not decisive for determining the overall cast of Calvin's thought. Calvin certainly read Antiochene theologians, especially the commentaries of John Chrysostom, and occasionally borrowed phrases from them. But such borrowing must not make us blind to the subtle shifts in significance that such phrases could undergo in Calvin's hands. Calvin used the language of "indwelling" rather loosely to refer to the Son's inhabiting of a body; he did not intend thereby that the Son indwelt a man with his own human *hypostasis*. Of a truly Antiochene Christology, there is scarcely a hint in Calvin's theology. It was more characteristic of Calvin to speak of the Son

¹¹ See Calvin's *Commentary* on Jn. 1:14 where he says, ". . . the unity of His person does not prevent His natures from remaining distinct, so that the divinity retains whatever is proper to it and the humanity likewise has separately what belongs to it."

¹² *Institutes*, II.xiii.2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Erklärung des Philipperbriefes* (Zollikon: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947), p. 61.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, I.xiii.11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II.xiv.1.

¹⁷ Johannes L. Witte, "Die Christologie Calvins," in Aloys Grillmeier and Heinrich Bacht eds., *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Bd. III (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag), pp. 501 and 493.

taking on our “nature” or “flesh.”¹⁸ In the main, Calvin’s Christology belonged to the Alexandrian–Cyrillian type. He was adamant in his rejection of “the error of Nestorius, who in wanting to pull apart rather than distinguish the natures of Christ devised a double Christ!”¹⁹

Witte was not wrong, however, to see in Calvin’s view a somewhat one-sided handling of the Chalcedonian formula.²⁰ Calvin was much more interested in the “without confusion, without change” of the formula than he was in the “without division, without separation.” The reason for the overemphasis on the distinction of natures is not far to seek; the controversy with the Lutherans was always in the back of his mind. Calvin was never able to escape the impression that the Lutheran doctrine of ubiquity resulted in a Eutychian mixing of the two natures. He devoted all of his strength to insisting that after the union, the two natures retain their own distinctive character unimpaired.²¹ Divine nature and human nature belong to radically different planes of being as far removed from one another as heaven from earth.²² From the perspective of later Reformed theology, Calvin was not at all wrong to insist on the distinction of natures in the way he did. His weakness lay rather in his inability to go on to say enough positively and concretely about the union itself. This showed itself especially in his treatment of the *communicatio idiomatum*.

In Calvin’s hands, the *communicatio idiomatum* becomes largely a hermeneutical device for dealing with passages in the New Testament that attribute activities to the person of the Mediator which may “properly” only be attributed to one of the two natures. So, for instance, in relation to passages that speak of God purchasing the church with His blood (Acts 20:28) or the Lord of glory being crucified (1 Cor. 2:8), Calvin says, “Surely God does not have blood, does not suffer, cannot be touched with hands. But since Christ, who was true God and also true man, was crucified and shed His blood for us, the things that he carried out in his human nature are transferred *improperly*, although not without reason, to His divinity.”²³ What Calvin has done is to reduce the *communicatio* to a mere figure of speech—in this case, a synecdoche. What is in reality true only for a “part” (the human nature) is attributed to the whole God-man. Missing in this account is any sense that the exchange

¹⁸ A striking example is the following: “. . . the church’s definition stands firm: he is believed to be the Son of God because the Word begotten of the Father before all ages took human nature in a hypostatic union. *Institutes*, II.xiv.5. But see also the whole of *Institutes*, II.xii–xiii.

¹⁹ *Institutes*, II.xiv.4.

²⁰ Witte, p. 500.

²¹ *Institutes*, IV.xvii.30.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, II.xiv.2. [The emphasis in this quotation is mine.]

of properties on a verbal level is only possible (and necessary!) because it has already occurred on the level of reality.

Later Reformed theology would want to insist that a real (and not merely verbal) exchange of properties does indeed occur; not, to be sure, between the natures, but between the natures and the Person of the union.²⁴ That which is true of the human nature is properly predicated of the Person of the union, since it is that Person who is the Subject of that human nature. On that basis, it would indeed be wholly *proper* to say that the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, became human and lived a completely human life with all the limitations that implies up to and including death. In Calvin's doctrine, however, such an affirmation is wholly lacking. I suspect that the reason for this lack has to do with Calvin's polemical horizon. Lutheran theology spoke of a communication of properties between the natures; Calvin was eager to oppose such an idea. The problem was that his zeal to counteract the Lutheran option made him blind to the other possibility: a real communication of properties to the Person of the union. But to envision that possibility would have required a more careful distinction too between the Person (or *hypostasis*) of the union and the divine nature than can be found in Calvin. Later Reformed theology would be faced with the task of reflecting upon the hypostatic union and its implications on a much more profound level than Calvin had been able to reach.

We may conclude this section on Calvin by saying that his great strength lay in his insistence that *after* the union, the properties of each nature are unimpaired. Two natures after the union—that certainly gave expression to a central feature of what became orthodox teaching in the late seventh century.²⁵ Calvin's weakness lay in his inability (or unwillingness!) to reflect more deeply on the hypostatic union itself. Without a more carefully considered teaching on the *communicatio*, Calvin's emphasis on the integrity of the natures after the union would inevitably serve the interests of Nestorianism, even if he himself were not Nestorian.

HEINRICH BULLINGER (1504–1575)

Heinrich Bullinger's Christology offered a significant advance beyond what we have seen in Calvin in that he clearly opened the door to a real *communicatio*

²⁴ Heinrich Heppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, newly edited by Ernst Bizer (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins Neukirchen, Kreis Moers, 1935), p. 328; English translation, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. by G. T. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 439 [Hereafter cited as "HpB."]

²⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 63.

idiomatum. I say he *opened the door* because his understanding of the problem of the hypostatic union was still fragmentary and incomplete. He made a genuine contribution to the development of Reformed Christology, however, and should not be overlooked.

Bullinger's most extended reflection on the problem of the hypostatic union is found in *Decades* IV, Sermon vi. Much of the material found here was devoted to defending the view we have already seen in Calvin; namely, that after the union the two natures retain their properties unimpaired. Clearly, Bullinger was as preoccupied with addressing the Lutheran doctrine of ubiquity as Calvin was. The effect of such a preoccupation was that Bullinger too, gave far more attention to the distinction of natures than he did to their union.

In spite of his relative silence on the problem of the unity of the natures, however, Bullinger gave some evidence that he had at least glimpsed some of the more crucial implications which would have followed from (and been grounded by) the analysis he failed to provide. He affirmed, for example, against Nestorius that Mary is rightly called the "mother of God." ". . . Albeit his heavenly nature be without generation and corruption, yet notwithstanding it is most certain that He whom Mary brought forth was God in very deed . . . [T]herefore she brought forth God and she worthily is called the mother of God."²⁶ Bullinger also did not hesitate to say that ". . . God suffered and was nailed on the cross for us."²⁷ To be sure, he was quick to add that God could only suffer and die as a result of the assumption of a human nature which was capable of suffering and dying, but he seemed to sense (however dimly) that to attribute the sufferings of Christ to the human nature alone (full stop), *as though to a subject in its own right*, would be to commit the error of Nestorius of seeing two persons in Christ. And so he says, "And since that [flesh] God accounteth not that as another's, *but as His own*, which He took unto Himself; we most truly say, that God with His own blood redeemed the world."²⁸

The crucial thought here is that God has attributed something to Himself. Whether Bullinger himself was fully conscious of it or not, the move that he made here was quite significant. If taken with full seriousness, it would mean that a *communicatio idiomatum* on the verbal level of theological discourse is possible and proper only because it is grounded in an objectively real *commu-*

²⁶ *Decades* IV, Sermon vi, p. 268. [I will here be citing from the Parker Society translation of 1851.]

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 269.

nicatio idiomatum. God has attributed something to Himself; God has taken on a human nature and lived a human life. The fact that Bullinger was also willing to interpret the *communicatio* by means of an appeal to John of Damascus' understanding of it as a mutual giving (antidosis) or interchange of properties²⁹ shows that he probably was conscious of the significance of this move. He probably did understand the *communicatio* as real and not merely verbal. In any case, he certainly did open the door to the affirmation of a real *communicatio*.

Bullinger's Christology represented something of a halfway house on the road to the emergence of Reformed Christology in its more mature form. He did not, so far as I am aware, reappropriate the ancient anhypostatic-enhypostatic model for understanding the relation of the human nature to the Person of the union. Later Reformed theologians would take this step, thereby opening up the possibility that preoccupation with the distinction of natures might finally give way to a greater concentration on the Person of the union.

ZACHARIUS URSINUS (1534–1583)

Zacharius Ursinus, the principle author of the Heidelberg Catechism, is rightly regarded as one of the fathers of early Reformed orthodoxy.³⁰ He was a professor of theology first at the University of Heidelberg from 1562 to 1577, then at the *Gymnasium* in Neustadt an der Weinstrasse until his death in 1583. His chief work, aside from the catechism itself, was his *Corpus doctrinae orthodoxae*, a series of lectures on the Catechism that were edited and published after his death by his good friend, David Pareus.³¹

Ursinus taught an anhypostatic-enhypostatic Christology in everything but the name. Therein lay his chief contribution to the development of what became the orthodox Reformed conception. According to Ursinus, the human nature of Christ is complete and full in every way but is not rightly regarded as a person because it does not subsist of itself. “. . . The human nature assumed by the Word . . . does not subsist by itself, but is sustained in and by another, viz., in and by the Word. It was formed and assumed by the Word at one and the same time, and never would have existed, unless it had

²⁹ Ibid., p. 270.

³⁰ For justification of this claim see Ernst Bizer, *Frühorthodoxie und Rationalismus* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1963), pp. 16–32.

³¹ This work was translated into English in 1852 and is still available in reprint. See Zacharius Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, translated by G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, n.d.). [Hereafter cited as *Commentary*.]

been assumed by the Word . . .”³² Both sides of the classical anhypostatic-enhypostatic understanding of Christology are present in this passage. “Anhypostatic” affirms something negative, that is, the human nature does not “subsist” or have existence in itself. “Enhypostatic” adds the positive thought that the human nature of Christ had its being and existence grounded (at every moment, from the conception on) in the Person of the Word.

What distinguishes “person” from “nature” for Ursinus is this: a “nature” is simply a catalogue of attributes or properties necessary to provide a full description of all that belongs by definition to a particular kind of being (in this case, human being). “Person” adds to this the thought that such a being is instantiated somewhere, that it exists.³³ Christology, however, requires a further refinement. Here the question becomes one of rightly determining what it is that gives rise to and grounds this particular human nature. The answer is that what gave the human nature of Christ its existence was not generation through sexual intercourse; it was rather the miracle of conception by the Holy Ghost. Ursinus was careful to say that this was not “a nature created out of nothing, or brought down from heaven.”³⁴ Rather, the human nature was formed from the “substance” of the mother (thus ensuring the human nature’s consubstantiality with human beings) and was joined to the Word in the Virgin’s womb by the power of the Holy Spirit (thereby granting the human nature existence and life).

The significance of Ursinus’s Christology may be fairly summarized as follows. In making subsistence the key element in distinguishing nature and person, Ursinus was suggesting (consciously or unconsciously) that the only thing that may be properly predicated of the “person” is the nature itself, as a whole and in its entirety. Particular attributes or traits on the other hand, must be predicated of the nature. For example, intellect, will, and “energy” of operation are properly predicated of the nature; yet, it is the person to whom the whole of the nature, together with its attributes and actions, must be attributed. Thus, whatever is done in and through the human nature of Christ is properly (and not improperly) attributed to the Person of the Word, in whom such action is grounded and granted existence.

Such an interpretation of the hypostatic union brought the Reformed conception closely into line with the decision of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. Against the Monothelites of the seventh century, the Council affirmed “two

³² *Commentary*, p. 210.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

natural volitions or wills in him and two *natural* principles of action which undergo no division, no change, no partition, no confusion"³⁵ as a result of the union. The Council thereby clearly assigned volition and energy of operation to the natures, rather than to the Person of the union. The effect was to safeguard the necessary distinction between nature and person. That Ursinus should have come to this—broadly speaking—Orthodox conclusion is probably not coincidental. He had read John of Damascus' *The Orthodox Faith* and cited it as an authority in the context of his delineation of the problem of how two natures constitute a single person.

Once the distinction between person and nature had been worked out, it then became possible for Reformed theologians to reconsider the problem of the *communicatio*. The problem now became one of showing how one could speak of a real *communicatio*, and even of a *perichoresis*, without doing violence to the principle embraced by Reformed and Orthodox theologians alike. The commonly held principle was that "at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single subsistent being [*hypostasis*]."³⁶ Reformed conclusions on this question might not have been fully amenable to every Orthodox theology of the late seventh century, but it surely would have found sympathy.

THE *COMMUNICATIO IDIOMATUM* IN THE PERIOD OF REFORMED ORTHODOXY

According to the Reformed conception that established itself as orthodox in the seventeenth century, the *unio personalis* has as its effect a real *communicatio idiomatum* "by which the attributes of each of the two natures coincide in one and the same person and are thereby also predicated of the person."³⁷ In insisting that the *communicatio* proceeded from the natures to the person, these theologians were at the same time rejecting the Lutheran notion of a direct *communio naturarum*. The communion of natures is not to be thought of as direct, but rather as indirect, mediated as it were by the Person of the union. Therefore, a distinction was helpfully made between the *unio immediata* which

³⁵ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* I. Edited by Norman P. Tanner. London: Sheed & Ward, 1990, p. 128.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁷ Friedrich Wendelin, cited in HpB, p. 328; E.T., p. 439. The theology of Wendelin (1584–1652) can be seen generally as belonging to the German Reformed type which emanated from Heidelberg, where he received his education under Ursinus' friend, David Pareus. See Ernst Bizer's "Historische Einleitung zu Heinrich Heppes *Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*," p. lvi.

pertained between the human nature and the Person of the Logos and the *unio mediata* of the two natures.³⁸

Now to speak of “person” as something that can mediate between “natures” obviously entails some difficulties. It would seem to predicate something of the “person” that is not predicated of either of the natures. Such a predication would be in violation of the rule established above that the only thing that can be predicated of the person is the natures themselves, taken as a whole and in their entirety. To speak of the person as a sort of buffer between the natures would be to make it a third something, between the natures, and that would clearly be a mistake. Yet, it is clear that something like a *unio mediata* has to be maintained. Otherwise, we wind up with a direct *communio naturarum*, and there would then be no good reason not to follow the Lutherans in speaking of a participation by the human nature in the attributes of divine majesty. So we must think of the communion of natures as indirect and mediated by the person. The notion of a *unio mediata* therefore functions as a kind of hermeneutical rule: a negative principle that establishes the limits of what may be thought and said. What it really says is that we must not think in terms of a direct *communio naturarum*. If we go on to flesh out the meaning of the *unio mediata* in too positive a fashion, however, we will enter into error. The seventeenth century theologians recognized this and said that the hypostatic union is ultimately a mystery. It is a union that is entirely unique in kind and, therefore, every attempt to point to an analogy to it must finally fail.

On the positive side, however, the *unio mediata* tells us something very important. It tells us openly and frankly that the human nature with all of its attributes and operations must be attributed to the Person of the Logos. The full consequences of this position were admittedly not seen by these seventeenth century theologians. They did not see, for example, what it would mean for their understanding of divine being that God was able—without ceasing to be God—to take up a human nature and to suffer and die in and through it. Nevertheless, they did succeed in opening the door to a possibility which a later theologian like Karl Barth, with his view of divine being as being-in-act, would exploit.

There is one further aspect of seventeenth-century Reformed reflection on the *communicatio* that merits our attention here because of its implication for soteriology: this is the idea of a *communicatio operationum* or *apotelesmatum*.³⁹

³⁸ This distinction also comes from the work of Friedrich Wendelin. See HpB, p. 327; English translation, p. 431.

³⁹ HpB, pp. 328–29; E.T., p. 445.

The presuppositions here, once again, are the ideas that the two natures remain distinct and their properties unimpaired after the union, and that each nature possesses its own will and "energy." What the *communicatio apotelesmaturum* says is that although the work of the God-man is single as regards its result, it is dual as regards its origination in the natures. In every action of the God-man, the two natures work together. Each cooperates in a way entirely appropriate to the kind of nature it is—the human nature humanly, the divine nature divinely—to produce a single effect. The energies remain distinct because the natures remain distinct; but the work of redemption that results is single because it was produced by the two energies working together in complete harmony. This harmony is ensured by the fact that the two natures subsist in one and the same person.

We may best draw out the significance of this teaching for soteriology by seeking an answer to the following question: who was the subject who redeemed us? Who was it that performed the work of redemption? On the basis of the Reformed understanding of the *communicatio apotelesmaturum*, we would have to say that the subject was neither God nor man, considered abstractly, but the one God-man in His divine-human unity. If we were to speak of the Logos as the Subject of our redemption (full stop), as occasionally happens in theological literature, we would run the risk of suggesting that the human nature was merely an instrument in the hands of God the Word. Not only would we then become soteriological docetists, by failing to give full weight to the humanness of the work of the God-man, we would also be Nestorian because we would be thinking of the work of redemption as being effected by "God *in* man," and not yet by "God *as* man."⁴⁰

By contrast, the Reformed understanding of the *communicatio apotelesmaturum* says that it is not only the full divinity of the work of redemption but also the full humanity of it that must be acknowledged. To put it this way is simply to apply the principles laid down by the Chalcedonian formula to the work of Christ. What the formula says of the Person of Christ is also true of the work of Christ: without separation, without division (so there are not two sets of works, two effects), *but also* without confusion, without change (so that in working together to produce a single work, the natures are not mixed or confused). If we take this seriously, then we must say that the work of redemption is *fully* human and *fully* divine. Thus, the Subject of our redemption is the God-man in His divine-human unity. The consequences of this for our understanding of the atonement will become clear in the next major section of this paper.

⁴⁰ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988, p. 150.

SUMMARY

We have basically established two things at this point. First, for a Christology to be "Reformed," it must affirm the principle that the two natures remain distinct and their properties unimpaired after the union. On that point, there is such overwhelming unanimity in the Reformed tradition that a Christology which would set it aside or weaken it must, by doing so, cease to be Reformed.⁴¹ Second, we have established that the Subject who worked out our redemption is the God-man in His divine-human unity. In saying this, I am also suggesting that the language of "subject" should not be used to translate *hypostasis* into a more modern idiom. The "Subject" in this case is not the *hypostasis* as such, but the *hypostasis* together with the two natures that subsist in it. God *as human*—He is the Subject of our redemption.

⁴¹ This principle has been given confessional status in the following documents: The *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter XI ("We therefore acknowledge two natures or substances, the divine and the human . . . And we say that these are bound and united with one another in such a way that they are not absorbed, or confused, or confused or mixed, but are united and joined together in one person—the properties of the natures being unimpaired and permanent."); *The Gallican Confession*, Art. XV ("We believe that in one person, that is, Jesus Christ, the two natures are actually and inseparably joined and united, and yet each remains in its proper character . . ."); and *The Belgic Confession*, Art. XIX ("We believe that by this conception the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; so that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in a single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties.").

III

The Doctrine of the Atonement

There are two decisive questions to be borne in mind in what follows. The first is, what is the nature of the atonement; that is, *how* does Christ atone for our sins? The second is, what is the relation of the atonement to the incarnation itself?

THE ASSUMPTION OF HUMAN "FLESH": FALLEN OR UNFALLEN?

The question implied by the title of this subsection is this: how are we to understand the human nature assumed by the Logos in becoming incarnate? Was it somehow a new creation, the miraculous emergence in time of that uncorrupted nature which Adam had before the fall, a human nature uncorrupted by original sin? Or was it a nature like unto our own in every respect? Was it a fallen human nature, a human nature tainted as our own is by original sin?

At the outset, it must be pointed out that the question in the form in which we have posed it here has a degree of precision which was lacking before the nineteenth century.⁴² This means that when we seek an answer to the question among sixteenth and seventeenth century writers, we inevitably give to their thought a precision it did not possess. Had anyone put the question in this precise form to Calvin, for example, his answer would undoubtedly have been that the Logos assumed an unfallen human nature. After all, his conclusion was that Christ "was exempted from common corruption."⁴³ And yet there are elements on the boundaries of his thought that—because they point in the other direction—force us to examine the matter more closely.

⁴² Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, pp. 166–69; English translation, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, pp. 152–55. [Hereafter abbreviated *K.D.* and *C.D.*]

⁴³ *Institutes*, II.xiii.4.

Calvin's reflections on the problem of how Christ was kept from defilement by original sin are found in the *Institutes* in the context of a debate with Menno Simons. Menno held to the view that in procreation, the female contributes nothing to the generation of the offspring; women are "without seed."⁴⁴ The woman acts solely as the passive receptacle for the male seed. If then, original sin is transmitted through procreation—as was widely held—then it would follow necessarily that the corruption of original sin attaches itself only to the male seed.⁴⁵ The absence of the male in producing an offspring (such as occurred in the miracle of the Virgin Birth) would then be sufficient of itself to guarantee that the human nature of Christ was without the taint of original sin. In Menno's view, Christ's human nature is literally created out of nothing, since the woman contributes nothing to the generation of an offspring. Of course, Menno's entire position rested on a thoroughly unscientific understanding of human reproduction, and Calvin at least knew enough about the subject to know that "woman's seed must share in the act of generation."⁴⁶ But this left him with the question: how then was Christ preserved from original sin? Calvin willingly acknowledged that the seed of the woman could not be exempted from corruption. The "substance" of the woman Mary from which the human nature of Christ was formed was indeed fallen. So what then? Calvin's answer was this: ". . . we make Christ free of all stain not just because he was begotten of his mother without copulation with man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit that the generation might be pure and undefiled as would have been true before Adam's fall."⁴⁷ In other words, it is due to the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the miraculous conception that the sinful substance of the woman is cleansed from every taint of corruption.

On this view, the question posed at the outset (Was Christ's human nature fallen or unfallen?) cannot be answered without qualification. It was indeed a fallen human nature in that it was taken from the substance of sinful human flesh. But it was made to be "unfallen"—or better, a "restored" true humanity, for this was in the strictest sense not a new creation—by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Admittedly, Calvin did not draw this conclusion: but then the question in the form in which we have posed it was not one that he enter-

⁴⁴ Ibid., II.xiii.3.

⁴⁵ Menno's view is not entirely without parallel in Reformed circles. Huldrych Zwingli, although not committing himself to the thought that women are without seed, seems clearly to have thought that original sin attaches itself only to the male seed. See Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1981), p. 112.

⁴⁶ *Institutes*, II.xiii.3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., II.xiii.4.

tained directly. We can only elicit an answer to it on the basis of what he does say, bearing in mind that we are giving to Calvin's thought a precision which it did not have.

Ursinus too, rejected the thought that the human nature of Christ was created out of nothing or brought down from heaven.⁴⁸ It was a human nature formed from the seed of sinful human flesh. Yet it was of the utmost importance to Ursinus that the Word not "assume a nature polluted with sin." His solution was the same as Calvin's: "The Holy Ghost miraculously sanctified that which was conceived and produced in the womb of the Virgin . . ."⁴⁹

For our purposes here, it is crucial to notice that for both Calvin and Ursinus, the agent of this sanctifying work was the Holy Spirit, and that the work itself was complete in the moment of conception. It is not the case that the sanctification of human nature (its healing from the corruption of original sin) took place in a processive fashion through the acts of obedience carried out by the God-man through the course of His life. It is also not the case that the healing resulted from bringing the divine nature into contact with the human nature. The agent who healed the human nature was not the Logos; it was the Holy Spirit. Such a teaching coheres nicely with the view advanced earlier that the communion of natures was a mediated union and not an immediate one. The implications of this view are extensive for our understanding of Christ's redeeming and reconciling work. If the God-man's life of obedience is to be accorded a redemptive significance, it will not be because those acts resulted in the sanctification of the human nature. The reason will have to be sought elsewhere.

Before turning to that question (in the next subsection), however, we must look first at how the Reformed fathers understood passages like 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf." If that does not mean that Christ assumed a fallen human nature, then what does it mean? Calvin understood "sin" in this passage to refer not to a sinful nature but to guilt.⁵⁰ And how is the guilt accruing to human sinfulness generally made to be His? To be "made sin" means that "the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God."⁵¹ The mechanism by which the guilt of our sins is made to be His then, is that of divine verdict

⁴⁸ See above, note #34.

⁴⁹ Ursinus, *Commentary*, p. 206. We will not pursue this matter further through the investigation of other Reformed theologians. Suffice it to say that the Reformed tradition generally followed Calvin in his view that the conception by the Holy Spirit resulted in the sanctification of the human nature. See HpB, pp. 325, 339–40; English translation, pp. 426–27.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Commentary*, 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁵¹ *Institutes*, II.xvi.5.

or imputation. "‘The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ [Isa. 53:6]. That is, he who was about to cleanse the filth of those iniquities was covered with them by transferred imputation."⁵² Thus, the fact that the human nature of Christ is sanctified in the miraculous conception and thereby kept from the defilement of original sin does not mean that He was not at some point "made sin" for us. Here, being "made sin" is understood as a judicial act of God in which the God-man is made liable for our sins and judged in our place.

The one criticism that I personally would wish to advance against the view thus far described is that it trades too heavily on traditional substantialist notions of human nature and original sin. Calvin defined original sin as "a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which makes us liable to God's wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls 'works of the flesh' [Gal. 5:19]."⁵³ Original sin is thus likened to a contagion that spreads more or less organically throughout the human race, infecting the soul and all of its powers. To be tainted with this disease is itself sufficient to make one liable to God's judgment, for guilt attaches to this disease before it ever gives rise to particular acts of sin. On this view, it is understandable that Calvin wanted to keep Christ free of this contagion. For if to be defiled in this way *already* entailed personal guilt and liability to God's judgment before acts of sin were committed, then Christ had to be kept free of this defilement. If He were not, He would have needed a Mediator for Himself, to redeem Him from the guilt accruing to *His own sin nature*.

The fundamental flaw in this view is that it regarded original sin as *inherited* depravity, rather than as the primal decision of Adam in which each individual participates through his/her own primal decision to affirm the disordered relationship with God which was the effect of Adam's first sin. Where original sin is understood in terms of primal decision, human "nature" is made to be the function of decision and act, rather than the other way around. On this basis, it could then be seen how Christ could enter the situation of disorder without bearing any *personal* responsibility for it (and thereby requiring a Redeemer for His own sin). Christ does not inherit a "sin nature," which would then need to be cleansed. His "nature," like our own, is defined by His decision. Christ enters our situation judicially, as our legal representative. The guilt of our sins is imputed to Him. Such an imputation does not give rise to a "sin nature" in Him because He never affirms the primal decision of Adam. On the contrary, He "condemns sin in His flesh" by *not* agreeing with

⁵² Ibid., II.xvi.6.

⁵³ Ibid., II.i.8.

this primal decision. One could even say, He “repented” of our decision by not making it Himself.

The great virtue of such a judicial or forensic understanding of the propagation of original sin is that it overcomes the substantialist understanding of human nature. It makes it finally clear how Christ could bear the guilt of our sins without having to affirm the primal decision of Adam. He is in the position of being able to refuse to affirm the primal decision of Adam because He does not inherit a diseased nature (any more than the rest of us do). The “sin nature” each of us has is a function of our primal decision to agree with Adam’s rebellion. Through His life of obedience, Christ refused to make that primal decision His own. That He did not do so cannot be explained on the basis of the hypostatic union alone; the work of the Spirit who brought together divine and human nature in the Virgin’s womb was the One who continually empowered the God-man in His life of obedience.

Such an interpretation, it seems to me, is what Karl Barth was after in speaking of the assumption of a “fallen human nature.” Barth did not understand human nature in substantialist terms. He understood “nature” to be a function of decision and act. The Logos, for Barth, elected Himself to stand in our place, to make Himself liable for human sin. That is what is meant by the assumption of “fallen human nature.” As Barth puts it:

In becoming the same as we are, the Son of God is the same in quite a different way from us; in other words, in our human being what we do is omitted, and what we omit is done . . . [T]he Word assumes our human existence, assumes flesh, i.e., He exists in the state and position, amid the conditions, under the curse and punishment of sinful man . . . Therefore, in our state and condition He does not do what underlies and produces that state and condition, or what we in that state and condition continually do.⁵⁴

The “sanctification” of human nature that results is not to be likened to a cleansing or healing of a disease; it is rather the function of the decision by which the Son of God chooses not to do what we do and to do what we choose not to.

That Barth was able to come to this conclusion was due in part at least to the emergence in seventeenth-century Reformed theology of the idea that original sin is transmitted to each individual by a direct divine act of imputation and not by means of inheritance. To be sure, seventeenth-century theologians were not yet in a position to see the full significance of this innovation. They did not allow their understanding of how original sin was transmitted

⁵⁴ See Barth, *K.D.* I/2, p. 170; *C.D.* I/2, p. 155–156.

to alter their view of original sin itself (which continued to be thought of—inconsistently!—in largely substantialist terms as a disease infecting the soul and its powers).⁵⁵ It was Barth's "actualistic" ontology that enabled him to finally overcome this inconsistency and to integrate the God-man's life of obedience into the judicial framework within which he also interpreted the significance of the cross.

THE ACQUIRED RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

How then did the Reformed tradition construe the redemptive significance of Christ's life? That Calvin, for example, wanted to see the life of Christ as itself redemptive is quite clear. ". . . From the time he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us."⁵⁶ Similarly, Bullinger could affirm that:

By His passion and death and everything which He did and suffered for our sake by His coming into the flesh, the Lord reconciled all the faithful to the heavenly Father, made expiation for sins, disarmed death, overcame damnation and hell, and by His resurrection from the dead brought again and restored life and immortality. For He is our righteousness, life and resurrection . . .⁵⁷

But how was this insistence on the redemptive character of the life of Christ concretely understood? To understand the significance that was attached to the life of Christ, we must see it in the broader stream of sixteenth-century reflection on the doctrine of justification. Luther had taught a view of justification as involving a twofold imputation: negatively, a nonimputation of sin to the sinner, and positively, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to him/her. In the early 1550's, a controversy broke out over the proper interpretation of the righteousness of Christ being imputed to the believer. Andreas Osiander, a professor of theology in Königsberg until his death in 1552, initiated the controversy through his teaching that the righteousness that is made ours in justification is the essential divine righteousness which was proper to Christ as divine.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, pp. 569–73; *C.D.* IV/1, pp. 510–13.

⁵⁶ *Institutes*, II.xvi.5.

⁵⁷ Bullinger, Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter XI.

⁵⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 151–52. Osiander developed this view on the basis of his belief that it is "God's Word and God Himself" who is the content of our justification (p. 151). Such a notion ought to put us on alert to the possible negative ramifications of speaking too unguardedly of the Logos as the Subject of our redemption. The Subject of our redemption is not the Logos *simpliciter*, but the Logos who assumed human flesh, i.e., the God-man in His divine-human unity.

Against this view, Calvin insisted in the 1559 edition of his *Institutes* that the righteousness that is made ours in justification is the *acquired* righteousness of Christ, that is, that righteousness which the God-man acquired through the acts of obedience performed throughout His life in His divine-human unity. Osiander, said Calvin, was not "content with that righteousness which has been acquired for us by Christ's obedience and sacrificial death, but pretends that we are substantially righteous in God by the infusion of his essence and quality."⁵⁹

Such a "mingling" of God and humankind was not something Calvin could allow. Calvin did indeed believe that God does not merely impute Christ's righteousness to us but also makes us to "feed upon" it (through baptism and the eucharist), thereby making us to be in actuality what he declares us to be by a judicial declaration. But the crucial point to notice here is that it is the righteousness which the God-man acquired through His acts of obedience that provides the basis of our salvation. Not even in Christ Himself is the righteousness that is proper to the Logos as God mixed with or infused into His human nature. Such a teaching would be a clear violation of the Chalcedonian formula (and its interpretation by the Sixth Ecumenical Council).

Thus, the redemptive significance of the life of Christ is not made to consist in the cleansing of a diseased human nature but (more positively) in the establishing of a divine-*human* righteousness. It is the creation of a new humanity. For Calvin, we are made participants in that righteousness by the power of the Holy Spirit who joins us to Christ. In stressing that it is the Holy Spirit who is the "bond by which Christ unites us to Himself,"⁶⁰ Calvin was once again seeking to maintain the distinction between divine being and human being. To say that this union is spiritual in nature does not yet explain it; after all, *how* the Spirit works is one of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. At most, we can say that the Spirit works through the preached word and sacrament to awaken faith. Union with Christ is thereby seen to be effected through faith. The affirmation, however, that the union is spiritual in character did act as an effective barrier for Calvin against the idea of an "essential union."⁶¹

Justification and sanctification were then interpreted by him as "a double grace" of our union with Christ. They are two benefits that cannot be confused without error and yet cannot exist apart from one another. Justification was interpreted in Lutheran fashion as a forensic judgment by God in which

⁵⁹ *Institutes*, III.xi.5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, III.i.1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, III.xi.10.

Christ's righteousness is imputed to men and women. Sanctification was understood as the process that endures throughout the Christian life, by which the believer is progressively made to be actually righteous. Since both flow from our union with Christ, they cannot exist apart from one another. The basis for both is that righteousness of Christ which he acquired through his perfect obedience to the will of the Father.

This focus on the acts of obedience through which Christ acquired a positive righteousness for us also provided Calvin with a way of integrating the life and death of Christ into a unified understanding of redemption. Obedience itself was the thread that joined the life of Christ to His death. And so he could write, "Now someone asks, How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favourable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience."⁶² This obedience reached its apex in his voluntary submission to death on a cross.

The Osiandrian affair and the response given to it by Calvin provided something of a defining moment for later Reformed theology. From that point on, Reformed theologians were united in their desire to see the redemptive significance of Christ's life in terms of his acquisition of a new righteousness. At times, they were guilty of giving too great a prominence to law in their conception of it. They could speak, for example, of a "twofold satisfaction": a satisfaction of the righteous demands of the law and a satisfaction of the penalty due to sin.⁶³ Such a conception afforded a great deal of integration; it brought both the life and death of Christ together under the heading of satisfaction. Unfortunately, the prominence of law in the conception resulted in an abstracting of law from the *graciousness* of the divine willing and action, thereby construing the efficacy of Christ's work in terms of *merit*.⁶⁴ Such an abstracting of law from grace was the unfortunate consequence of the emergence of the idea of a "covenant of works." They were on the right track, however, in suggesting that this "twofold satisfaction" was the response to a *twofold need* in the human race. For these later theologians, the death of Christ was seen to be addressed to the problem of guilt and the life of Christ to the problem of original sin (the "sin nature"). Certainly, it is quite true that it is not

⁶² Ibid., II.xvi.5.

⁶³ Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, I.xviii.1(8) in John W. Beardslee, III, trans., *Reformed Dogmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 99.

⁶⁴ The prominence of law was the unfortunate consequence of the emergence of the idea of a "covenant of works." For the history of this development, see Gottlob Schrenk, *Gottesreich und Bund im älteren Protestantismus vornehmlich bei Johannes Coccejus* 2nd ed. Giessen/Basel: Brunnen Verlag, 1985. For a penetrating criticism of the idea, see Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, pp. 57-70; *C.D.* IV/1, pp. 54-56.

enough to be forgiven for sins committed. Sin has to be dealt with at its roots, in that primal decision that determines and shapes human existence. The life of Christ was understood as having laid the basis for the new humanity, and it is now the Spirit who makes us participants in it.⁶⁵

THE DEATH OF DEATH IN THE DEATH OF CHRIST

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed reflection on the meaning of the death of Christ was directly in the stream whose source was the modified Anselmianism of Thomas Aquinas. I speak here quite deliberately of a "modified Anselmianism" because of the very important transformation that Anselm's so-called "satisfaction theory" underwent at the hands of Thomas. The modification consisted in this: where "satisfaction" (consisting in restitution of the obedience "stolen" from God and an additional recompense for His wounded honor) and punishment had been regarded by Anselm as an "either-or" (as mutually exclusive alternatives), Thomas saw satisfaction occurring through punishment. The righteous demands of God are satisfied through punishment, a punishment consisting in the death of the sinner. For Thomas, the death of Christ was to be regarded as substitutionary in this sense: Christ submitted Himself voluntarily to be punished in our place, to die the death that sinners deserved, thereby redeeming us from the debt of punishment which we owed to God.⁶⁶ It was this understanding that provided the kernel of the Reformed interpretation as well.

The cross stood at the heart of Calvin's understanding of atonement. The life of Christ was certainly important to him as we have seen; however, it was the cross above all that absorbed his attention when he turned to the question of *how* Christ achieved salvation for us. The central categories by means of which he explicated the significance of the cross for our salvation were the categories of wrath and judgment, satisfaction and penal substitution. ". . . God's wrath and curse always lie upon sinners until they are absolved of guilt. Since he is a righteous Judge, he does not allow his law to be broken without punishment, but is equipped to avenge it."⁶⁷

Briefly stated, Calvin's view was this: Christ stood in the place of sinners; the whole burden of our sin and guilt was transferred to him. "This is our

⁶⁵ A complete treatment of the Reformed understanding of the work of Christ would have to view the life of Christ in the light of its "prophetic" and "kingly" aspects. From Calvin on, Reformed theologians organized their presentations of the work of Christ in terms of a threefold mediatorial office, having a prophetic, a priestly, and a kingly aspect.

⁶⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.48, 4.

⁶⁷ *Institutes*, II.xvi.1.

acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God.”⁶⁸ Thus, we are absolved from all guilt, for the guilt for sins we committed was now Christ’s alone. He made Himself to be the Sinner in our place, and as Sinner, died the death that we deserved. This was not simply the “common death” that awaits every human being as his or her destiny.⁶⁹ It was a death in God-forsakenness which produced tremendous agony in His human soul. This death was the expression of the wrath of God; it was the punishment ordained by God in response to human sin. Through this death, the wrath of God was appeased and God was rendered gracious and favorable toward us.⁷⁰ In addition to satisfying the wrath of God, the death of Christ had one other fruit. “By our participation in it, his death mortifies our earthly members so that they may no longer perform their functions; and it kills the old man in us that he may not flourish and bear fruit.”⁷¹ Thus, the fact that the obedience of Christ extended even unto death is regarded by Calvin as the completion of that new righteousness which is made ours in justification and sanctification. The shed blood of Christ is “a laver to wash away our corruption.”⁷²

There are two chief weaknesses in Calvin’s theology of the cross. I would like to explore them here by way of a conversation with the theology of Karl Barth.

The first major weakness in Calvin’s theology of the cross is this: to speak as Calvin did of the death of Christ as rendering God favorable and kindly toward us seems to imply that God was not so inclined until moved to be so by the sacrifice of the Son. Such a conception, however, is exceedingly problematic. If God were not graciously and mercifully inclined toward the human race from the outset, why would He have sent His Son to redeem us? Calvin was clearly aware of this problem. He noted that a contradiction seems to arise when we think that God was our enemy until He was reconciled to us through Christ. “For how could he have given in his only-begotten Son a singular pledge of his love to us if he had not already embraced us in his free favour?”⁷³ Yet, passages like Romans 5:10 seemed to him to suggest that God was indeed our enemy until Christ reconciled us to Him. Calvin’s solution was to regard

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, II.xvi.5.

⁶⁹ The Genevan Catechism of 1545, Q.65: “. . . He endured not only common death, which is the separation of soul from body; but also the pains of death, as Peter calls them (Acts 2:24). By this word I understand the fearful agonies with which his soul was tormented.”

⁷⁰ *Institutes*, II.xvi.4, 5, 6 and II.xvii.4.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, II.xvi.7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, II.xvi.6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, II.xvi.2.

passages like Romans 5:10 as “accommodated to our capacity.”⁷⁴ Calvin believed that we could grasp neither the profound depths of our misery apart from Christ nor the depths of the divine mercy if such passages were not present in the Scriptural witness. Because these passages are accommodated by God to our limited capacity for understanding, they do not give adequate expression to the truth as it is in God. In the final analysis, Calvin was convinced that the grace and mercy of God are the effective ground of the atonement; the atonement did not give rise to grace and mercy as its effect. “Indeed, ‘because He first loved us,’ He afterward reconciles us to Himself.”⁷⁵

Calvin’s solution to this “contradiction” was not finally satisfactory. The notion of a divine accommodation is itself problematic, for it all too easily suggests that the way God reveals Himself to be is not finally commensurate with what He is in Himself. Moreover, his way of formulating the problem rested on a misinterpretation of passages like Romans 5:10, which do not say that God was our enemy until Christ reconciled us to Him, but rather that we were His enemies. The enmity spoken of lies on the human side, not on the divine side. Does such a reading of the New Testament witness then mean that all talk of the judgment and wrath of God may simply be dismissed? Not at all. Such categories belong to the heart of New Testament teaching on the atonement.

The real source of the problem lay in Calvin’s tendency to make the righteousness of God, abstracted from His love, the object toward which the atoning work of Christ is directed. It is the righteousness of God (or, alternatively, His wrath) that is satisfied; the love of God drops from view at the decisive point. It is not enough to affirm that the reconciling activity of the Son of God has its *ground* in the divine love if we are not then able to affirm in a coherent way that that love is operative at every step along the way in the accomplishment of our redemption. We must show how the divine love comes to expression precisely in the outpouring of wrath and judgment. If we do not, we introduce a contradiction into the being of God between God’s mercy and His righteousness. We make God’s mercy the prisoner, so to speak, of His righteousness, until such time as righteousness has been fully satisfied. That is the final outcome of Calvin’s version of the satisfaction theory. By appealing to the idea of accommodation, he had allowed the (apparent!) contradiction between mercy and righteousness to stand. He had taken the position that on the conceptual level, these things cannot be resolved: all the while hoping that somehow, in a way incomprehensible to us, a resolution does exist in God Himself.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., II.xvi.3.

Calvin's difficulty in this area was due in no small measure to the scant attention he gave to the classical problem of the attributes of God. His treatment of the being and attributes of God was thin, to say the least.⁷⁶ It is only when we see the atoning work of Christ against the background of a carefully thought through doctrine of God that the unity of mercy and righteousness can be seen and allowed to come to expression in our formulation of the doctrine of the atonement. Seventeenth-century Reformed theology was scarcely able to overcome this defect. If anything, its treatment of the atonement as a satisfaction of the divine wrath was even more abstract than Calvin's. Calvin at least sensed that there was a problem. The later Reformed theologians, from Ursinus on, did not.

It was not until the twentieth century that a theologian emerged who was finally able to overcome the deficiencies in the satisfaction theory as traditionally set forth in Reformed theology and to give it a more solid foundation. That theologian was Karl Barth. Barth's first extended treatment of the doctrine of the atonement (in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* at least) is found in volume II/1, in the context of a treatment of the divine attributes or "perfections" (as he preferred to call them).⁷⁷ For our purposes here, the crucial move made by Barth was to order the holiness and righteousness of God under the heading of perfections of the divine loving. The perfections of the divine loving were then set forth in dialectically related pairs that mutually condition each other. The holiness of God was paired with grace, and the righteousness of God was paired with mercy.

The grace of God was defined by Barth as the completely unmerited turning by God toward sinful men and women with the fullness of the divine good pleasure and favor. However, holiness is also a perfection of the divine loving. It is the holiness of God's love which makes His love different from every other kind of love. It is the holiness of His love that makes it divine. The holiness of the divine love refers to the fact that as God graciously seeks and creates fellowship with men and women, He does so as their Lord, as One who maintains His own will over against every other will. This means, in practice, that God will not allow anything to stand in the way of His love. The holiness of the divine love is its irresistibility. God's will to love the creature will not be stopped by the will of the creature to resist that love. God's love will reach its goal, even if the path to that end lies through condemning, excluding, and annihilating all resistance to it. God's love turns to wrath when it is resisted,

⁷⁶ Calvin devotes only a very brief section of one chapter to the subject in his *Institutes*. He clearly regarded this subject matter as susceptible to the kind of speculation he deplored. See *Institutes*, I.x.2.

⁷⁷ Barth, *K.D.* II/1, pp. 394-457; *C.D.* II/1, pp. 351-406.

but not for a minute does it cease to be love even when it expresses itself as wrath. For the goal at which the wrath of God arrives when once it has removed every obstacle in its path is the gracious renewal of fellowship. The wrath of God, in other words, serves the gracious purposes of God. God's No serves God's Yes. His judgment is the instrument of our salvation. Throughout, God's grace is powerfully at work.

In a similar fashion, Barth made righteousness to be dialectically related to mercy. The mercy of God refers to the pity with which God regards our distress. Our situation is one of pitiable folly and bondage to our own desires, evasions, and rationalizations. In spite of this, God never ceases to sympathize with us, to suffer with us in our suffering. That is the mercy of God. But here again, righteousness must be brought in as a perfection of the divine loving to condition our understanding of mercy. The loving of God is a righteous loving, and this too distinguishes it from all other kinds of love and qualifies it as divine. To speak of God's love as righteous means that when God, out of the richness of His mercy, wills and creates fellowship with sinful human creatures, He does that which is worthy of Himself. He is faithful to Himself as God.

Now this fidelity of God to Himself must not be reduced (as occurred in Albrecht Ritschl's teaching, for example) to a mere consistency in the way God guides His people to Himself. God's revelation of Himself has the character not only of Gospel but also, and at the same time, of Law. God's revelation manifests His will as righteous and distinguishes it from all that is unrighteous. The God who is revealed in the death of Christ is in truth the Judge—the absolute standard of righteousness in whose light all the thoughts, words and deeds of men and women are seen to be what they are, either good or evil. So whatever God does to create and establish fellowship with men and women has to be in accordance with His righteousness in this sense; it must be in accordance with Law. According to Barth, this is the point of Paul's twice-repeated phrase in Romans 3:24f.: the setting forth of Jesus Christ to be a *hilasterion* in His blood was for the demonstration of God's righteousness. In other words, what took place in the death of Christ was not the execution of a divine will that was out of step with the divine righteousness: what took place on Calvary was the execution of the one righteous will of God. The unity of mercy and righteousness is seen precisely here. *Mercy reaches its goal through the execution of the righteous judgment of God.*

With this groundwork on the perfections of God in place, Barth turned briefly to the doctrine of the atonement. The central question here was: How does the righteous judgment of God express itself in the event of the cross? The answer is: It expresses itself as wrath and condemnation. Why as wrath

and condemnation? Because that is what the human race deserved from God. "The meaning of the death of Jesus Christ is that there God's condemning and punishing righteousness broke out, really smiting and piercing human sin . . . It did so in such a way that in what happened there . . . the righteousness of God which we have offended was really revealed and satisfied."⁷⁸ We deserved the punishment of death, but Jesus Christ took our place, and as our Substitute, endured the punishment that was due to our sins.

In saying this, there was one crucial misconception that Barth wanted to guard against. The motive force in the drama that unfolded on Calvary was not the suffering of an innocent man. "There is no moving of God by the creature on the basis of which God can then decide on a universal amnesty. It is rather God's own heart which moves in creation on the basis of His own good pleasure. It suffers what the creature ought to suffer and could not without being destroyed."⁷⁹ What Barth is suggesting is that God is not moved from wrath to mercy by an offering made to Him from the human side. God's mind is not changed by what happens on Calvary. Rather, the motive force that produced the saving work of Christ is throughout the love of God, even when that love expresses itself as wrath and judgment and punishment.

In spite of his best efforts to affirm the unity of grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness as perfections of the divine loving, Barth's treatment of the atonement in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1 suffered from a potentially disastrous weakness. At the crucial point, he repeated the error of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theologians and made the death of Christ a satisfaction offered to the divine righteousness. This way of speaking still tended to abstract righteousness from love as mercy. If the intentions expressed in Barth's dialectically ordered treatment of the divine perfections were to bear fruit, a different way of conceiving of satisfaction would have to be found.

Barth returned to the problem of atonement in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1.⁸⁰ His treatment of the subject there showed that he had seen his inconsistency and was now in a position to rectify it. The change consisted above all in this: the idea of penal substitution, while not being wholly abandoned, was now clearly seen to be the instrument of the divine love. Where before, penal substitution had enjoyed a great prominence (as that which satisfies the divine wrath and thereby is the effective element in producing atonement), it now was placed in a more clearly subordinate position.

⁷⁸ Barth, *K.D.* II/1, p. 446; *C.D.* II/1, p. 396.

⁷⁹ Barth, *K.D.* II/1, p. 453; *C.D.* II/1, p. 402.

⁸⁰ Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, pp. 231-311; *C.D.* IV/1, pp. 211-283.

The concept of punishment has come into the answer given by Christian theology from Is.53. In the New Testament it does not occur in this connexion. But it cannot be completely rejected or evaded on this account. My turning from God is followed by God's annihilating turning from me . . . But we must not make this a main concept as in some of the older presentations of the doctrine of the atonement . . . in the sense that by His suffering our punishment . . . He "satisfied" or offered satisfaction to the wrath of God. The latter idea is quite foreign to the New Testament.⁸¹

According to Barth's mature conception, what is "satisfied" in the atonement is not the wrath of God in the abstract, but rather the holy *love* of God. The divine action in which sin is attacked and destroyed at its root in Jesus Christ occurs:

. . . not out of any desire for vengeance and retribution on the part of God, but because of the radical nature of the divine love, which could "satisfy" itself only in the outworking of its wrath against the man of sin, only by killing him, extinguishing him, removing him. Here is the place for the doubtful concept that in the passion of Jesus Christ, in the giving up of His Son to death, God has done that which is "satisfactory" or sufficient in the victorious fighting of sin to make this victory radical and total.⁸²

It is the love of God which is "satisfied;" that is all that is necessary to achieve our salvation. Now, seen against the background of the thought of the overwhelming of sin by the holy love of God, the element of penal substitution can be introduced and receive its proper due.

The very heart of the idea of atonement is the overcoming of sin. . . . It was to fulfil this judgment on sin that the Son of God as human took our place as sinners. He fulfills it—as human in our place—by completing our work in the omnipotence of the divine Son, by treading the way of sinners to its bitter end in death, in destruction, in the limitless anguish of separation from God . . . We can indeed say that He fulfills this judgment by suffering the punishment which we have all brought on ourselves.⁸³

That the love of God is *holy* love means that God must do what is worthy of Himself in achieving the ends of love. Therefore, God's love could not

⁸¹ Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, p. 279; *C.D.* IV/1, p. 253.

⁸² Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, p. 280; *C.D.* IV/1, p. 254.

⁸³ Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, p. 278; *C.D.* IV/1, p. 253.

accomplish its purposes with humankind unless God condemned sin and removed it, unless He poured out His wrath upon it. The way to the full accomplishment of God's loving and merciful purposes with the human race had to lie through the outpouring of wrath. Wrath is here clearly seen in its proper place, as the means to the accomplishment of the ends of love, as the *necessary* means (since God is *holy* love), but still only the means. Still more important, however, is to see that this is an act of holy *love*. It has its ground in the love of God; it is accomplished through the loving act in which the Son of God as human takes upon Himself the full reality and consequences of our sin and judges it and removes it; thus, it has its end in the loving purpose of restoring fellowship with sinful human creatures.

Barth's view of the atonement still operates, as he himself expressly says, within a forensic [*juristischen*] framework.⁸⁴ The Son of God as human takes our sin upon himself by placing Himself under the divine judgment, by making Himself liable for our guilt and its consequences. The major difference between Barth's conception and the classical Reformed view at this point is that Barth understands the Son of God to stand under this judgment through the whole of His life, from cradle to grave, whereas the old Reformed theologians saw the imputation of sin to Him as taking place only in the passion itself. Still, Barth operates within a forensic framework, and to that extent, is still moving within the sphere of classical Reformed thought and its modified Anselmianism.

The second chief weakness in Calvin's understanding of the passion and death of Christ is a function of his Christology. As we saw earlier, Calvin was quite concerned to maintain the distinction between human nature and divine nature in the hypostatic union. The effect of this concern on his interpretation of the work of Christ is that he tended to strictly segregate actions that he thought pertained to the human nature from actions that he saw as pertaining to the divine nature. Because he had not reflected deeply enough on the anhypostasia of the human nature assumed in the incarnation, he was not able to see clearly that what is accomplished in and through the human nature has to be attributed to the Logos as the Person of the union. This shows up most poignantly in his treatment of Jesus' cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

In fairness to Calvin, it has to be said that he took the cry of dereliction very seriously indeed. He understood the cry to be the expression of heartfelt anguish, fear, and even despair due to His abandonment by God. "... [S]urely no more terrible abyss can be conceived than to feel yourself forsaken and

⁸⁴ Barth, *K.D.* IV/1, p. 301; *C.D.* IV/1, p. 274.

estranged from God; and when you call upon Him, not to be heard.”⁸⁵ Thus, Christ “suffered in His soul the terrible torments of a condemned and forsaken man.”

Calvin’s way of handling these problems, however, does not yet probe the depths of the situation. He rightly assigns fear and dread to Christ’s human nature; rightly, because it is only through the addition of a human nature that the Logos can have this experience. Yet Calvin stops short of attributing this experience, on the basis of a real *communicatio*, to the Person of the Logos. His reason for doing so is clear: he is concerned not to weaken or set aside what he takes to be the biblical concept of the divine immutability. He also senses that to make the eternal Son the Subject of the death in God-abandonment would seem to introduce a conflict or even rift between Father and Son. Calvin considered this impossible. The Father never ceased to love His eternal Son.⁸⁶

The truth in Calvin’s position is that we must not introduce a rift into the divine being. Death in God-abandonment must not be reduced to an intra-trinitarian affair in which the eternal Father abandons the eternal Son. Such a conclusion would mean that the eternal bond of love joining Father and Son was broken in the event of the cross and that is indeed unthinkable.

Here again, it was Karl Barth who showed the way in which the difficulty might be resolved. The way forward lay through a christocentric approach to fleshing out the definition of divine being. God’s being for Barth is to be understood as Self-determined being, that is, as a being determined by His primal decision never to be God apart from humankind.⁸⁷ In electing the human race in eternity to be His covenant partner, God at the same time was also electing Himself to be God for us. He was determining Himself for incarnation, for taking on human life with all the limitations proper to it, up to and including death. If God dies on the cross—and the doctrine of the anhypostasia ought at least to tell us that the Subject of this death could be no other than the *God-man*—if God has done this, then who are we to tell God that He cannot do it? Again and again, Barth insisted that we must not come to Christology with a preformed conception of the divine being, with an understanding of the divine being that has been fleshed out entirely without reference to what God has actually done in Christ. If God does something in Christ, then it is obvious that He can do it. We must learn to understand divine being on the basis of what God concretely does in Christ and not on

⁸⁵ *Institutes*, II.xvi.11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Barth, *The Humanity of God*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978.

the basis of some kind of philosophical reflection carried out in abstraction from the Christ event. Thus, Calvin's chief problem was resolved. The immutability of God is in no way called into question, for the actions and relations of the eternal Son in time (in the incarnation) are "built-into" the being of God in eternity through election.

Calvin's problem was not really immutability at all, but the concept of God that he presupposed and which he used the thought of immutability to secure. Calvin's concept of God was finally that of a being complete in itself before it ever thinks, wills, and acts. It was an abstract concept of divine being, fleshed out through a process of philosophical reflection without reference to the concrete acts of God. Against this procedure, Barth showed that the kind of being God is is determined by His primal decision to be the kind of God who can take to Himself a human nature and live a human life. The net effect of Barth's effort to see divine being as determined by divine decision and act is this: if God has determined Himself from eternity for death on a cross, then death on the cross, so far from introducing a change into the divine being is actually the most complete and full expression of that being. The immutability of God is in no way set aside. It is in the cross, as nowhere else, that we receive the fullest possible disclosure of the nature of divine being. God does not undergo change by coming to us in this way.

If then we expand our focus a bit and ask about the meaning of death in God-abandonment, we will have to say this. "God-abandonment" does not mean that the eternal Father abandons the eternal Son. The thought of a rift in the divine being, of a "God against God," is already excluded by the fact that in becoming human and dying on a cross, God does that which is proper to Himself. The meaning of "God-abandonment" has to lie elsewhere. The way to a solution is seen when we keep in mind that the Subject of Christ's work is not finally the Logos *simpliciter*, but the Logos made human: the God-man in His divine-human unity. This is a *human* experience, the experience of the man or woman who dies in dereliction. In taking human nature to Himself, the Logos takes this experience to Himself. He takes it into Himself and absorbs it, and precisely because He is God and thus not able to be separated from His loving Father; He extinguishes its power. Because He has had this human experience, we will never have to and that is good news indeed. *That* is the real significance of the biblical phrase "O death, where is thy sting?" The sting is gone, removed forever by the glorious victory of the God-man over it.

Conclusion

I had originally hoped to say something about the subject of “divinisation” as the concluding piece in my discussion of the atonement. The dialogue format, however, means that a few brief comments by way of conclusion will have to suffice.

In the sixteenth century, there were hints and suggestions here and there which suggested that in spite of the stringent focus on the radical distinction between divine being and human being, room was still left for the thought of a real communion between the two. Consider for example, the following statement from the *First Helvetic Confession*, Art. 11: “This Lord Christ, Who has overcome and conquered death, sin and the whole power of hell, is our Forerunner, our Leader and our Head. He is the true High Priest who sits at God’s right hand and always defends and promotes our cause, until He brings us back and restores us to the image in which we were created, *and leads us into the fellowship of His divine nature.*”⁸⁸ Now what conclusions might we draw from the use of such language?

The first thing to notice is that the fellowship spoken of here is an eschatological reality. As such, it ought not to be conceived as entirely discontinuous with what comes before. Already, in this life, fellowship with God through the Son is established, on the Reformed view, by the Holy Spirit. This fellowship is initiated by the regenerating work of the Spirit in baptism and is nourished by the sanctifying work of the Spirit in the eucharist. The process of sanctification that is initiated in baptism continues throughout life until, after dying, the believer is brought into the very presence of God. At this point, the “sin nature” of the believer is at last annihilated and the believer is restored in the image of God, that is, in holiness, righteousness, and true knowledge of God. In later Reformed theology, this consummation of the process of sanctification was called “glorification.”

⁸⁸ Emphases added by me.

Second, the Subject who brings about this fellowship is once again the Holy Spirit. The Spirit not only makes believers to be participants in the divine virtues of wisdom, holiness, and righteousness; He also glorifies the Son, thereby making possible a spiritual vision of the Son as He really is. The focus of this vision is still Christ in His human nature. The Spirit reveals the Son in His glory by casting light on His human nature, making it a constant and eternal bearer of revelation; the Spirit in the believer receives and rejoices in that light. Throughout, the thought of the mediated character of our fellowship with the divine being is maintained.

By way of conclusion, we may say that the Reformed understanding of incarnation and atonement distinguishes itself through its continuous emphasis on the distinction of divine being and human being and through the very prominent role it assigns to the Holy Spirit as the Power which joins together divine being and human being without setting aside the distinction. It is the Spirit who brings divine nature and human nature together in the hypostatic union and mediates between them. It is the Spirit who empowers and makes possible the obedience of the Son in and through His human nature. It is the Spirit who joins us to the Son, thereby effecting our sanctification and our justification. And it is the Spirit who "glorifies" believers by glorifying the Son in eternity.

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